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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000382

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KJUS](#) [KCRM](#) [KCOR](#) [KDEM](#)
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SUBJECT: PRT ANBAR: DESPITE EFFORTS, VOTER PARTICIPATION
HARD TO PREDICT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 00289
[B](#). BAGHDAD 00178
[C](#). BAGHDAD 00372

Classified By: Classified by PRT Anbar Team Leader Paul Fitzgerald for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (U) This is an Anbar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) reporting message.

[2](#). (SBU) Summary. Anbari government leaders, tribal sheikhs and religious leaders are encouraging Anbaris to vote in the March 7 national elections. Yet PRT-gathered anecdotal evidence and polling data suggests significant challenges remain. Anbar voters are discouraged by recent violence, the exclusion of candidates by the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC), and the widespread belief that Iran controls the Government of Iraq (GOI). Nevertheless, many Anbaris are determined not to boycott the vote as they did in 2005, viewing it as a strategic mistake. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT LEADERS SHOW ENTHUSIASM AND CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM
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[3](#). (C) Prior to the AJC exclusion of candidates, provincial government officials predicted a 60% voter turnout, mirroring the January 2009 provincial election. After the AJC announcement, Acting Provincial Governor Fo'ad Jitab al-Karbouli stated that the disqualification list discouraged potential voters and disrupted coalition building-efforts. Like many Anbaris, Karbouli felt the exclusion of candidates proved there has been no national reconciliation, and that people were not being given a free choice. In a January 20 meeting with PRToffs, Karbouli said that in recent meetings with local clerics and sheikhs he is stressing the importance of "get out the vote" messages. "We all know that the only way forward is that we must vote. If voters do not go to the polls, we only open up the (GoI) to increased Iranian influence and control," he remarked.

[4](#). (C) At the local level, Fallujah city government officials echoed a similar determination. Regarding Anbar Sheikh Ahmed abu Risha's recent talk of a boycott (ref A), City Council head Sheikh Hamid Rashid al-Alwani told PRToffs on February 4 that the city council and all local sheikhs will turn out the vote and are prepared to counter publicly any calls for a boycott. This determination has taken the form of a friendly rivalry between tribal sheikhs in the Fallujah area to ensure voter participation in the elections.

BUT SKEPTICISM ABOUND
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[5](#). (C) In Saqlawiyah and Ameriyah, two towns outside of Fallujah, voter enthusiasm is significantly curbed by security concerns. The Chairman of the Saqlawiyah City Council told PRToffs that he thinks fewer than 40% of

eligible voters will go to the polls because Saqlawiyah has endured many IED attacks, and the public does not believe that the Iraqi Police are able to stop them.

¶6. (SBU) Leaders in eastern Anbar have called for the absence of U.S. Forces on election day, believing that their presence will draw attacks against polling centers and depress voter turnout. Many local leaders also fear that political parties will simply buy votes. One Fallujah city council member warned that the market rate for a vote was USD \$50 to \$100.

¶7. (SBU) In Rutbah and Karmah, city officials are expecting low turnout. They claim that many Iraqis in these areas do not want democracy and fear that those who do support the democratic process will be targeted by those who oppose it. Still others simply do not believe voting will make any difference. These areas are still run by CPA-appointed municipal governments, and some western Anbaris cite this as a reason for their disenchantment with the concept of democracy. "If you want democracy, go to America," said one man from Rutbah.

SHEIKHS WARY OF DEMOCRACY =====

¶8. (C) Anbar's paramount sheikhs continue to support the vote (ref B) but are growing increasingly wary. Prominent local sheikhs, including Sheikh Ahmed abu Risha - the most politically influential Anbar sheikh - have characterized the AJC list as an Iranian-directed assault on their political prospects. Sheikh Khamis Abd al-Kareem al-Fahadawi, the leader of one of the most influential tribes in Ramadi,

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remarked that the constitution's de-Ba'athification provisions are being used as a weapon against Sunnis, and are further punishment against those who have lost family members to the fight against Al-Qaeda.

¶9. (S) The sheikhs strongly believe that the recent meetings with GOI leaders by the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and the Iranian Foreign Minister, along with the Iranian incursion into the southern Fakka oil field and the lack of an Iraqi military response, are proof that Iran is controlling the central government (ref B). Sheikh Hamed Rashid al-Alwani remarked that "Iraq is not ready for democracy. We need a few years to root these people out first." In a February 9 meeting with the Ambassador (ref C), all of the attending sheikhs voiced a desire for USF-I to slow down their withdrawal from Iraq and for the USG to directly intervene in GOI affairs, expressing fears that Iran is taking over the country. However, they do see the necessity of voting, and admitted that boycotting the 2005 election was a strategic blunder that they are determined not to repeat. They view voting as the only realistic option to counter Iranian influence.

THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT PUSHES FOR THE VOTE =====

¶10. (S) The governing body of Sunni Islam in Anbar, the Anbar Sunni Endowment, has been a strong advocate for voting in Anbar. Endowment head Sheikh Abdullah Jalal and his deputy, Sheikh Riyadh Dhiyab Zoobaa, have written and disseminated several sermons stressing the importance of every man and woman in Anbar voting in the election. In late January, the Endowment issued a fatwa (religious ruling) that participation in the election is to be regarded as a religious duty. Sheikh Abdullah announced this fatwa on television and gave a recorded copy to Deputy Prime Minister Issawi for national distribution. Independent USF-I and PRT sources have verified that Ramadi and Fallujah mosques have repeated this message.

¶11. (C) Despite the Endowment's support for the election

process, its leaders greatly distrust the Independent High Elections Commission (IHEC), which they feel is not impartial, and deplore the AJC's decision to exclude Sunni candidates. Sheikh Abdullah has stated privately to PRToffs that this is an attempt by the GOI to mute the voice of Iraqis and cripple their ability to rebuild their country: "The prevention of professionals who belonged to the former regime from running for office or working in government is not helpful. We need trained people to rebuild our cities." As with other Anbaris, Sheikh Abdullah believes this is being done at the behest of the Iranians, who he considers to be the real power in Baghdad.

THE ANBAR STREET) DIVIDED AND UNSURE
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¶12. (SBU) In order to collect its own data, the PRT developed five standard election questions, printed them on a card, and distributed the cards to all PRT members and local staff to use when engaging local residents. In the PRT's numerous engagements with non-elites since January 25, these five questions have been asked:

- Do you plan to vote, and if so, why?
- What are your feelings about security for the election? -

What is the most important issue in this election?

- Do you think your vote will make a difference?
- What is your reaction to the AJC's exclusion of candidates?

¶13. (SBU) From January 25 to February 7, the PRT questioned 127 Ramadi and Fallujah residents, both women and men, ranging from 18 to 45 years old. Slightly less than half the Qranging from 18 to 45 years old. Slightly less than half the respondents had some college education, and an additional third were high school graduates. Some 38% indicated that they intended to vote and that they were hoping that the new parliament would be more balanced and better represent Sunni interests. Over 65% of these already-committed voters indicated that supporting the new political and democratic process was the most important issue, transcending the political platforms of the parties themselves, even if their vote did not ultimately have a significant impact on the outcome.

¶14. (SBU) Twenty-eight percent stated that they would not vote because they felt that the same coalitions would hold power and nothing would change. They cited the AJC's exclusion of prominent Sunni candidates as evidence that those in power in Baghdad were determined to hold on to power

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and deny Anbaris their voice. Eighty percent of all respondents felt strongly that this committee was designed to exclude Sunni leadership from power. More than half of the respondents indicated that they did not care if someone was previously a Ba'athist and they supported the inclusion of every candidate, regardless of background.

¶15. (SBU) The remaining 40% of the respondents said they still hadn't decided whether or not to vote. One-third of the respondents cited the current security situation as their primary concern, including most of those who had not yet decided to vote. In spite of previous reporting from government leadership that the presence of the Iraqi Army would have a destabilizing effect on Anbar, 58% of respondents indicated that they felt safer with the presence of the Iraqi Army, often remarking that, because they are from outside Anbar, they are likely to be fairer and more vigilant. In a January 24 conversation with a group of young Ramadis, most insisted that they would go to the polls and encourage their family to vote. However, a majority followed that statement with the pronouncement that "it won't make a difference anyway. Nothing will change, but we have to vote."

¶16. (C) COMMENT: In spite of the recent AJC disqualification of candidates, Anbari religious, tribal, and government

institutions continue to support the election for different reasons. In eastern Anbar, where the bulk of Anbaris live, local government and religious institutions appear to be working together to get Anbaris to the polls, and, to varying degrees, believe that there is some chance for incremental change. The primary motivation for tribal institutions to support the polls appears to be a tacit acceptance that it is the only way they can counter what they view as the greatest threat: Iranian influence. When talking with other "non-elite" Anbaris, however, the picture becomes much less clear, with some insisting that they will vote out of principle and others insisting they won't because of security. One thing that they all agree on is that they feel there is little hope for real change in the Iraqi Government.

END COMMENT.

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